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ABSTRACT

This digest is intended to help parents and teachers understand and cope with underachievement in gifted students. Underachievement is defined and its various components (e.g., content and situation specificity and ties to self-concept development) are explained. Strategies to reverse patterns of underachievement are classified as either supportive, intrinsic, or remedial. Guidelines are offered to families in applying all three types of strategies. The value of participation by underachieving gifted students in a gifted program is noted. A distinction is made between praise for achievement outcomes and encouragement of a child's efforts. Underachievement is seen as a reversible but complex web of behaviors. Includes 13 references and 15 resources for students. (DB)

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UNDERACHIEVING GIFTED STUDENTS

There is perhaps no situation more frustrating for parents or teachers than living or working with children who do not perform as well academically as their potential indicates they can. These children are labeled as *underachievers*, yet few people agree on exactly what this term means. At what point does underachievement end and achievement begin? Is a gifted student who is failing mathematics while doing superior work in reading an underachiever? Does underachievement occur suddenly, or is it better defined as a series of poor performances over an extended time period? Certainly, the phenomenon of underachievement is as complex and multifaceted as the children to whom this label has been applied.

Definition of Underachievement

Early researchers (Raph, Goldberg, & Passow, 1966) and some recent authors (Davis & Rimm, 1989) have defined underachievement in terms of a discrepancy between a child's school performance and some ability index such as an IQ score. These definitions, although they seem clear and succinct, provide little insight to parents and teachers who wish to address this problem with individual students. A better way to define underachievement is to consider its various components.

Underachievement, first and foremost, is a behavior, and as such it can change over time. Often, underachievement is seen as a problem of attitude or work habits. However, neither habits nor attitude can be modified as directly as behaviors. Thus, referring to "underachieving behaviors" pinpoints those aspects of children's lives which they are most able to alter.

Underachievement is content and situation specific. Gifted children who do not succeed in school are often successful in outside activities such as sports, social occasions, and after-school jobs. Even a child who does poorly in most school subjects may display a talent or interest in at least *one* school subject. Thus, labeling a child as an "underachiever" disregards any positive outcomes or behaviors that child displays. It is better to label the *behaviors* than the child (e.g., the child is "underachieving in math and language arts" rather than an "underachieving student").

Underachievement is in the eyes of the beholder. For some students (and teachers and parents), as long as a passing grade is attained, there is no underachievement. "After all," this group would say, "A C is an average grade." To others, a grade of B+ could constitute underachievement if the student in question were expected to get an A. Recognizing the idiosyncratic nature of what constitutes success and failure is the first step toward understanding underachieving behaviors in students.

Underachievement is tied intimately to self-concept development. Children who learn to see themselves in terms of failure eventually begin to place self-imposed limits on what is possible. Any academic successes are written off as "flukes," while low grades serve to reinforce negative self-perceptions. This self-deprecating attitude often results in comments such as "Why should I even try? I'm just going to fail anyway," or "Even if I do succeed, people will say it's because I cheated." The end product is a low self-concept, with students perceiving themselves as weak in academics. Under this assumption, their initiative to change or to accept a challenge is limited.

Strategies to Reverse Patterns of Underachievement

Luckily, it is easier to reverse patterns of underachieving behavior than it is to define the term *underachievement.*

Whitmore (1980) described three types of strategies that she found effective in working with underachieving behaviors in students:

1. *Supportive strategies.* - Classroom techniques and designs that allow students to feel they are part of a "family," versus a "factory," include methods such as holding class meetings to discuss student concerns; designing curriculum ac-

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tivities based on the needs and interests of the children; and allowing students to bypass assignments on subjects in which they have previously shown competency.

2. *Intrinsic strategies.* These strategies incorporate the idea that students' self-concepts as learners are tied closely to their desire to achieve academically (Purkey & Novak, 1984). Thus, a classroom that invites positive attitudes is likely to encourage achievement. In classrooms of this type, teachers encourage attempts, not just successes; they value student input in creating classroom rules and responsibilities; and they allow students to evaluate their own work before receiving a grade from the teacher.
3. *Remedial strategies.* Teachers who are effective in reversing underachieving behaviors recognize that students are not perfect—that each child has specific strengths and weaknesses as well as social, emotional, and intellectual needs. With remedial strategies, students are given chances to excel in their areas of strength and interest while opportunities are provided to improve in specific areas of learning deficiencies. This remediation is done in a "safe" environment in which mistakes are considered a part of learning for everyone, including the teacher.

The key to eventual success lies in the willingness of parents and teachers to encourage students whenever their performance or attitude shifts (even slightly) in a positive direction.

Participation in Gifted Programs

Students who underachieve in some aspect of school performance, but whose talents exceed the bounds of what is generally covered in the standard curriculum, have a right to an education that matches their potential. To be sure, a program for gifted students may need to alter its structure or content to meet these students' specific learning needs, but this is preferable to denying gifted children access to educational services that are the most accommodating to their abilities.

Role of the Family

The following are some broad guidelines—representing many viewpoints—for strategies to prevent or reverse underachieving behavior.

Supportive strategies. Gifted children thrive in a mutually respectful, nonauthoritarian, flexible, questioning atmosphere. They need reasonable rules and guidelines, strong support and encouragement, consistently positive feedback, and help to accept some limitations—their own as well as those of others. Although these principles are appropriate for all children, parents of gifted children, believing that advanced intellectual ability also means advanced social and emotional skills, may allow their children excessive decision-making power before they have the wisdom and experience to handle such responsibility (Rimm, 1986).

Gifted youngsters need adults who are willing to listen to their questions without comment. Some questions merely preface their own opinions, and quick answers prevent them from using adults as a sounding board. When problem solving is appropriate, offer a solution and encourage students to come up with their own answers and criteria for choosing the best solution. Listen carefully. Show genuine enthusiasm about students' observations, interests, activities, and goals. Be sensitive to problems, but avoid transmitting unrealistic or conflicting expectations and solving problems a student is capable of managing.

Provide students with a wide variety of opportunities for success, a sense of accomplishment, and a belief in themselves. Encourage them to volunteer to help others as an avenue for developing tolerance, empathy, understanding, and acceptance of human limitations. Above all, guide them toward activities and goals that reflect *their* values, interests, and needs, not just yours. Finally, reserve some time to have fun, to be silly, to share daily activities. Like all youngsters, gifted children need to feel connected to people who are consistently supportive (Webb, Meckstroth, & Tolan, 1982).

Intrinsic strategies. Whether or not a gifted youngster uses exceptional ability in constructive ways depends, in part, on self-acceptance and self-concept. According to Halsted (1988), "an intellectually gifted child will not be happy [and] complete until he is using intellectual ability at a level approaching full capacity.... It is important that parents and teachers see intellectual development as a requirement for these children, and not merely as an interest, a flair, or a phase they will outgrow" (p. 24).

Providing an early and appropriate educational environment can stimulate an early love for learning. A young, curious student may easily become "turned off" if the educational environment is not stimulating; class placement and teaching approaches are inappropriate; the child has ineffective teachers; or assignments are consistently too difficult or too easy. The gifted youngster's ability to define and solve problems in many ways (often described as *fluency of innovative ideas* or *divergent thinking ability*) may not be compatible with traditional gifted education programs or specific classroom requirements, in part because many gifted students are identified through achievement test scores (Torrance, 1977). According to Linda Silverman (1989), Director of the Gifted Child Devel-

opment Center in Denver, Colorado, a student's learning style can influence academic achievement. She contends that gifted underachievers often have advanced visual-spatial ability but underdeveloped sequencing skills; thus they have difficulty learning such subjects as phonics, spelling, foreign languages, and mathematics facts in the way in which these subjects are usually taught (Silverman, 1989a, 1989b). Such students often can be helped by knowledgeable adults to expand their learning styles, but they also need an environment that is compatible with their preferred ways of learning. Older students can participate in pressure-free, noncompetitive summer activities that provide a wide variety of educational opportunities, including in-depth exploration, hands-on learning, and mentor relationships (Berger, 1989).

Some students are more interested in learning than in working for grades. Such students might spend hours on a project that is unrelated to academic classes and fail to turn in required work. They should be strongly encouraged to pursue their interests, particularly since those interests may lead to career decisions and life-long passions. At the same time, they should be reminded that teachers may be unsympathetic when required work is incomplete. Early career guidance emphasizing creative problem solving, decision making, and setting short- and long-term goals often helps them to complete required assignments, pass high school courses, and plan for college (Berger, 1989). Providing real-world experiences in an area of potential career interest may also provide inspiration and motivation toward academic achievement.

Praise versus encouragement. Overemphasis on achievement or outcomes rather than a child's efforts, involvement, and desire to learn about topics of interest is a common parental pitfall. The line between pressure and encouragement is subtle but important. Pressure to perform emphasizes outcomes such as winning awards and getting A's, for which the student is highly praised. Encouragement emphasizes effort, the process used to achieve, steps taken toward accomplishing a goal, and improvement. It leaves appraisal and valuation to the youngster. Underachieving gifted students may be thought of as discouraged individuals who need encouragement but tend to reject praise as artificial or inauthentic (Kaufmann, 1987). Listen carefully to yourself. Tell your children when you are proud of their efforts.

Remedial strategies. Dinkmeyer and Losoncy (1980) have cautioned parents to avoid discouraging their children by domination, insensitivity, silence, or intimidation. Discouraging comments such as "If you're so gifted, why did you get a D in _____?" or "I've given you everything; why are you so _____?" are never effective. Constant competition may also lead to underachievement, especially when a child consistently feels like either a winner or a loser. Avoid comparing children with others. Show them how to function in competition and how to recover after losses.

Study-skills courses, time-management classes, or special tutoring may be ineffective if a student is a long-term underachiever. This approach will work only if the student is willing and eager, the teacher is chosen carefully, and the course is supplemented by additional strategies designed to help the student. On the other hand, special tutoring may help a concerned student who is experiencing short-term academic difficulty. In general, special tutoring for a gifted student is most helpful when the tutor is carefully chosen to match the interests and learning style of the student. Broad-ranged study-skills courses or tutors who do not understand the student may do more harm than good.

Conclusion

Some students, particularly those who are highly capable and participate in a variety of activities, appear to be high achievers when learning in a highly structured academic environment, but they are at risk of underachieving if they cannot establish priorities, focus on a selected number of activities, and set long-term goals. On the other hand, some students appear to be underachievers but are not uncomfortable or discouraged. They may be quite discontent in middle or secondary school (in part because of the organization and structure), but happy and successful when learning in an environment with a different structure. They may handle independence quite well.

Underachievement is made up of a complex web of behaviors, but it can be reversed by parents and educators who consider the many strengths and talents possessed by the students who are labeled as underachievers.

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